

Sunday, February 22, 1976

The Washington Star A-3

Plutonium Tests on People

United Press International

Scientists in a secret government project injected 18 men, women and children with overdoses of bomb-grade plutonium three decades ago without telling their human guinea pigs what they were being given, federal researchers said yesterday.

Dr. James Liverman of the Energy Research and Development Administration said the World War II-era experiment was forgotten for about 20 years and records are sketchy today. But, he said, there is no evidence any of the 18 suffered ill effects from their injections.

A science newsletter, Science Trends, said present-day researchers who recently learned of the experiment find it ethically "reprehensible" but valuable from the lessons it taught about effects of plutonium exposure.

Liverman said three of the 18 subjects — two men and a woman — still are alive.

He said one, a black man in Texas, is "healthy for a man in his late 70s" and was told the nature of the injection about two years ago. The other three, Liverman said, are in their 80s and have not been told because of their mental or medical condition.

PLUTONIUM IS considered one of the most toxic substances known to man. Even small amounts are believed capable of causing cancer.

But Dr. Patricia W. Durbin of Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory at Berkeley, Calif., who discovered the existence of the survivors about four years ago, said

in Science Trends: "These cases serve to demonstrate the plutonium does not appear to be more carcinogenic than expected and, as far as bone (cancer) is concerned, may actually be less carcinogenic than expected."

Liverman expressed hope the rediscovery and renewed study of the 18 injection subjects, plus the cancer-free records of 25 persons exposed to plutonium in preparing early hydrogen bombs at Los Alamos, N.M., will help reduce fears about the danger of plutonium fuel in proposed nuclear breeder power reactors.

The injections were conducted between 1945 and 1947 — 17 by the Army during its supervision of the nuclear bomb program, and one after the Atomic Energy Commission was formed — to help set safe exposure levels for those dealing with plutonium in the bomb program.

ALL 18 SUBJECTS, whose names ERDA will not disclose, were consider-

ed terminally ill at the time.

A spokesman said 13 of the human guinea pigs were men and five were women, 15 were whites and three were blacks, and most were middle-age adults.

The injections were performed in the Strong Memorial Hospital at the University of Rochester in Rochester, N.Y.; the Billings Hospital at the University of Chicago; the University Hospital at the University of California in San Francisco, and at a government hospital in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

ERDA said the amount of plutonium injected ranged from 2 to 145 times the present maximum permissible dose for the human body. None was a lethal dose.

Liverman said the black man still living in Texas was the only one to get the maximum dose. He said it was injected in the man's leg, below the knee, about 48 hours before the leg was amputated at the knee because of existing cancer.